

A Voice All Her Own

Singer Gretchen Parlato sweeps aside her fears on *The Lost and Found*.

By Kara Manning

Photos by David Bartolomi

Harsh, bright sunlight streams through the front window of an Upper West Side French bistro, just three days after New York has been bullied by a Boxing Day blizzard.

Ever the temperate Angelino, despite living in Manhattan for seven years, singer and songwriter Gretchen Parlato is an oasis of California calm, nursing a lukewarm cup of Earl Grey tea and dreamily turning her face upwards into the glare, as if the blinding rays rebounding against drifts of gray snow were reflected off of a sandy beach instead.

"This is so pretty, the sun," she murmurs. Given the frigid temperatures outside, her faith in the afternoon's non-existent warmth is a gently optimistic gesture that also hints at the quintessence of the soft-spoken vocalist's new music; her third album, *The Lost and Found* [ObliqSound], is a halcyon study of contrasts, which might well describe Parlato herself.

"The theme just kept unraveling of the lost and found," she says of her latest release for which Parlato wrote, for the first time, a handful of songs. "The opposition of dark and light, bad and good. It's always a cycle. Just when you think something makes sense and you've figured it all out, without fail, something happens that knocks us off balance."

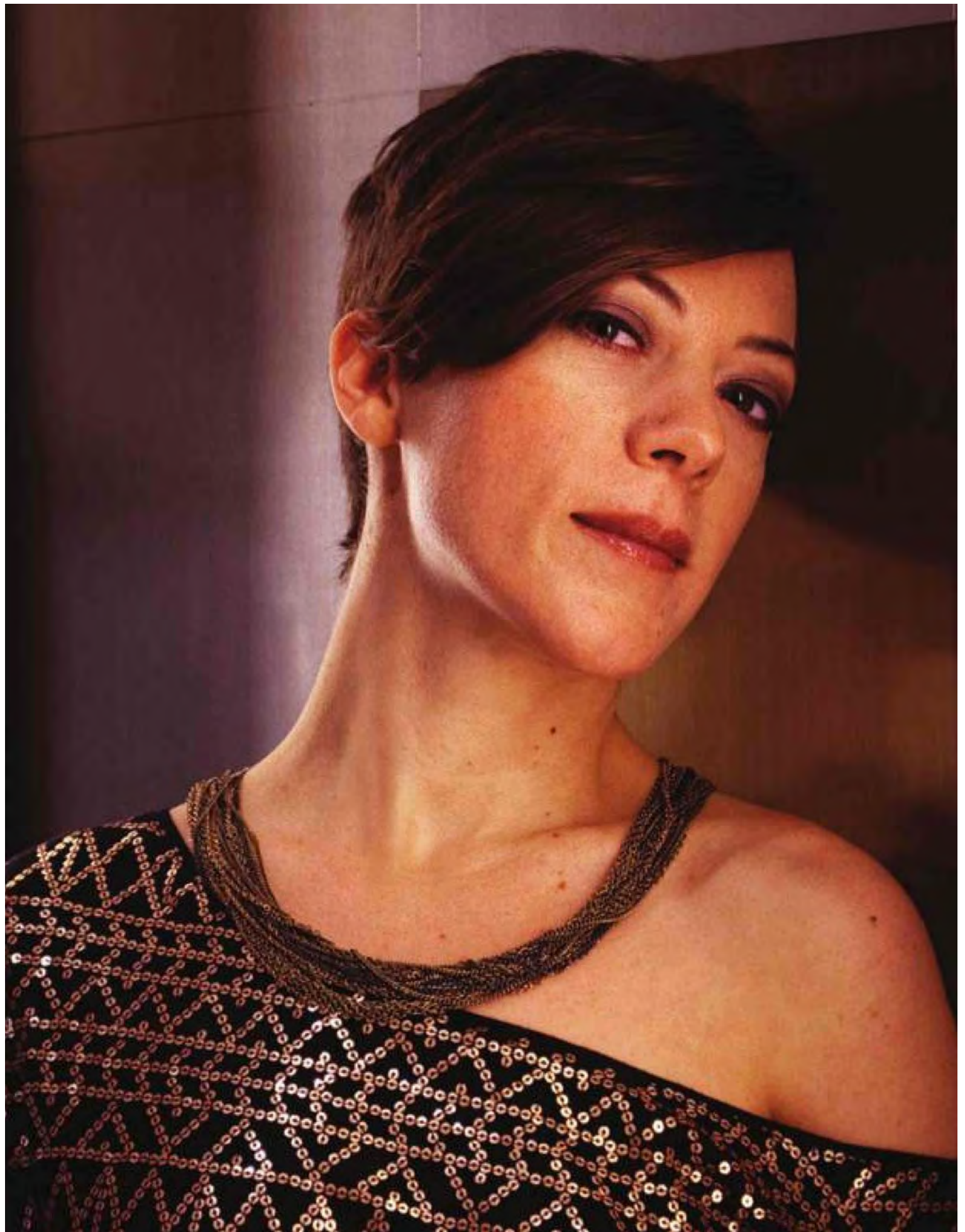
Although the 35-year-old first created a stir in jazz circles back in 2004 when she won the prestigious Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance's International Vocal Competition and has since sold out venues worldwide, Parlato is most in her comfort zone not when basking indulgently in the soloist's limelight, but when she's jamming alongside other instrumentalists as part of a band. She frequently lends her breezy-but-brooding vocals to friends' projects,

like bassist Esperanza Spalding's *Chamber Music Society*, her former Monk Institute classmate Lionel Loueke's *Virgin Forest* and most recently, David Binney's *Graylen Epicenter*. To flog the well-worn carpet of a cliché, Parlato is the very definition of a musician's musician.

Spalding, who first met Parlato a few years ago when they were featured in the "Revive Da Live" series in New York, e-mailed that her friend's vocals give her "goosebumps" and amusingly calls Parlato's eponymous 2005 debut album by her own title: "Gretchen Parlato Kills You With Her Yummy Voice to the Delight of Listeners Around the World."

"Right away Gretchen's phrasing and timing strikes people," explains Spalding. "It certainly did me. Her voice has a very sweet percussive quality. She also can make her voice have an alto-flute-like quality. ... One thing that I've experienced is how she communicates with players from within the group, not 'on top,' so to speak, as some vocalists do, [or] singing with the band as back-up. I think that's one of the reasons so many musicians love to play with her."

Grammy-nominated jazz vocalist Tierney Sutton, who began tutoring Parlato when she was just a 17-year-old Los Angeles high-school student, concurs. "Gretchen is 'inside' the music. Many, many singers sing well but are not willing to be sunken into the sound created by the instrumentalists. There's a palpable listening going on, and Gretchen telegraphs it to her bandmates. And she picks great people who love her enough to play in a way that serves her sound, like Lionel Loueke, Taylor Eigsti, Kendrick Scott, Jamire Williams, Mark Giuliana and Alan Hampton."



Despite Parlato's malleable vocals, don't expect brassy tour-de-force belts from the petite singer, despite a pixie-cut resemblance to young Pat Benatar. Her nuanced perambulations through songs like the Lauryn Hill-penned, Mary J. Blige-originated "All That I Can Say," which appears on *The Lost and Found*, is stealth and understated, a soulful murmur brushed by fragile piano and a loping, percussive gait. While Parlato admittedly delights in finding "her jam" in the long list of covers she's traversed, segueing from Björk to Stan Getz to SWV (Sisters With Voices), it's the inclusion of four of her own original songs on *The Lost and Found* that heralds a gutsy forward step for a vocalist who was once effusively described by one of her former Monk Institute mentors, Wayne Shorter, as knowing how to play "the same instrument that Frank Sinatra played."

Writing her own songs has filled Parlato with "a healthy sense of nerves," but also adheres more closely to her aesthetic of revealing the emotional core of any performance and mining the autobiographic marrow of every song in her repertoire. She'd been prodded in the past to write, but remained skittish on her first two albums, including 2008's *In A Dream*. While a student at the Monk Institute, she was urged by artistic director Terence Blanchard to pen lyrics to Shorter's "Juju," and she later recorded part of that version for her eponymous album. For *The Lost and Found*, she has rather romantically returned to "Juju" again, her vocals glissading in a melodic *pas de deux* with Dayna Stephens' tenor sax. It's as if she wished to begin from scratch with new assurance.

"I just recently got out of my own way," she says with a rueful smile. "I always thought that with music and lyrics, I didn't have much to say, and we were singing these songs that were perfect. How do you top Ellington, Gershwin and Cole Porter? But as human beings we each have something to share. It's personal, but you can interpret it any way you want. The song you think is really uplifting and joyous, well, maybe it's ironic and I'm being sarcastic. Each time I'd write something, I'd realize that I could see it — and someone else could see it — both ways."

Overcoming her reluctance to write songs and finally able to "be comfortable with the uncomfortable," Parlato, who also produced her new album with longtime friend, Grammy-nominated jazz pianist Robert Glasper, turned to a core ensemble of frequent collaborators and composers for the record: pianist Taylor Eigsti, bassist Derrick Hodge and drummer Kendrick Scott. She recruited Stephens, her former Thelonious Monk Institute classmate, and guitarist/bassist Alan Hampton to guest on a few songs, including their own compositions, "The Lost and Found" and "Still," respectively.

Glasper's involvement was key to Parlato. The pair first met, to Parlato's best recollection, in a tiny New York club about seven years ago. They immediately found an easy dialogue, a fondness for a blurring of musical boundaries. Like Parlato, Glasper's eclectic résumé represents the new wave of genre-defying jazz artists; Glasper seamlessly fuses hip-hop and R&B in his own music and has collaborated with a starry list of musicians and MCs, acting as music director for Mos Def and Bilal, and working with the Roots' Questlove, Kanye West, Common, Jay-Z, Erykah Badu and more. Glasper is one of Parlato's closest musical confidantes, and she entrusted him with

helping her find her way through all 15 tracks on *The Lost and Found*, recorded in a shockingly swift three-day session last August in New York. Despite Parlato's reputation in jazz circles as a chanteuse with a natural affinity for West African and Brazilian rhythms, she says that she's equally influenced by R&B, Afrobeat and even rap, her vocals percussively caressing and propelling the music forward in a way that, while more placidly evoked, doesn't feel dissimilar from the freestyling of Mos Def.

Glasper concurs. "She can go with the flow like a hip-hop artist, meaning go with the musical moment," he wrote via e-mail. "That's an art that's not common anymore. I hate most 'jazz' vocalists because they lack the 'jazz.' I think in this recording process I was able to bring out the elements in the music that weren't typical jazz elements and that incorporated more influence from other relevant musical styles, such as hip-hop and soul, without changing what's natural for her voice."

Parlato, in turn, relied on Glasper's deceptively simple way of finding a song's essence. "Robert has a way of deconstructing pieces, almost as in hip-hop when you use a song as a sample and you break it down to a simple form, maybe two chords," she explains. "We share the same theory and method with covers. It's what I did on the last album [*In a Dream*] with 'I Can't Help It.' I'm not Michael Jackson or Stevie Wonder so I had to approach it in a way of breaking it down to a very simple form and build upon it from there. Robert does the same thing."

That idea of breaking down a song to find its core essence might also apply to Parlato's artistic trajectory. She confronted a wall of self-doubt when in 2001 the UCLA ethnomusicology graduate became the first vocalist ever admitted to the Thelonious Monk Institute's two-year scholarship program and ensemble, handpicked by Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and its artistic director, trumpeter Terence Blanchard. It was Blanchard who pushed Parlato to embrace her artistic life, without reservations.

"I used to call Terence 'coach' because he was rooting for me," she says. "He could see at the time I was still trying to figure out who I was musically, [learning] how to communicate with people and face my fears. He actually said to me, 'You have a fear of success.'"

And Parlato did. As the only woman and feeling like an outsider — given the other musicians' Berklee College of Music background — she admits crying through most of her tenure at the Institute, convinced that her weaknesses were magnified, and unable to adequately reconcile the no-man's land of being both a student and a professional singer.

"I was always really upset and emotional there," continues Parlato. "I wanted to be a singer, but did I want to spend all my life on an airplane? In a hotel room with a crazy schedule and not being grounded? I love being home and settled." She found handy excuses for avoiding some of Blanchard's suggestions, like learning to play piano or taking sight-singing lessons. "I would make up something that would allow me not to continue and create my own hurdles. He would point to my fear of success and [ask me] what would happen if I actually break out and become what I should be as an artist. It was cool of him to say, because it made me realize that's what I was afraid of. It was okay for me to be scared of getting out there, but once I was out there, it was like, 'Hey, this is actually an amazing life.'"

Familial history also helped Parlato understand the risks and rewards. The daughter of jazz bassist David Parlato and visual artist Judy Frisk, Gretchen was raised by an artistically focused family and was constantly encouraged to pursue her craft. Her sister is a graphic designer, her uncle is an actor, her mother's father, Caleb Frisk, was a successful Swedish recording engineer and Gretchen's paternal grandfather was jazz trumpeter and singer Charlie Parlato. The Parlato clan recently discovered — and Gretchen promptly tweeted — that Charlie even sang backing vocals on Sam Cooke's "You Send Me."

While there was no shortage of film soundtracks or jazz and classical music around the house, from Ella Fitzgerald to *The Sound of Music* to the 1964 Stan Getz and João Gilberto album *Getz/Gilberto*, it was the pop music of the '80s that also shaped Parlato: The Police, David Bowie, The B-52s and The Cars. Significantly, it was also the era of Michael Jackson's greatest influence on pop culture. On *The Lost and Found*, Parlato's indebtedness to Jackson's fragile phrasing is evident on songs like the languid "Better Than" and "All That I Can Say."

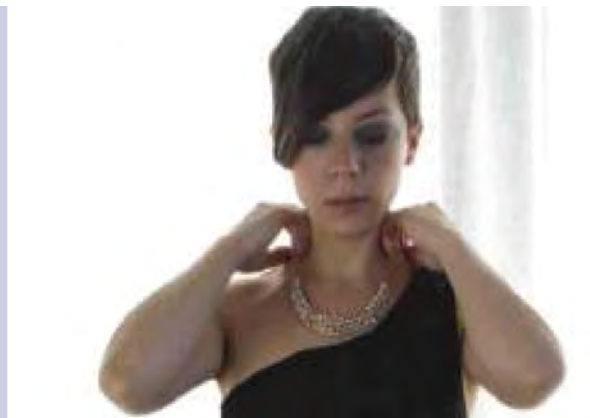
"I've been listening to him forever," says Parlato. "I don't really think I thought about what a huge influence he was, sadly, until after he passed. He was one of the first singers I heard, and I'd memorize all of his licks. [He was] very soulful, but it wasn't about belting out a song. You can have this very light, airy quality, but still do those intricate runs. Singers like Jackson and João Gilberto can be so subtle, but there's so much depth. Again, it's that opposition; it's deceptively simple — it's not like what they're doing is easy — and there's bravery in being vulnerable like that."

Like Jackson, Parlato was singing as a toddler. On her album *In a Dream*, she punctuates her cover of "Butterfly" with a recording of her 2-year-old self merrily singing in the bathtub. When the teenaged Parlato began studying with Sutton, her prudent teacher was determined not to inhibit or "mess up" the talent she observed in any way.

"She came to her first lesson with a recording of her singing Stan Getz's solo on 'Desafinado,' note-perfect and wonderfully in-tune, already with her own 'GP vibe,'" recalls Sutton. "I really wish I could take some small credit for her blossoming, but I thought she was pretty damn blossomed. Last year I was looking through some old files and found the file I had on her at the beginning of her lessons. I wrote 'Put her on an all-instrumentalist diet.' I thought that was pretty interesting, based on what she's doing now. I think I wanted to make sure she accepted the voice she had right away."

Sutton's wish came true. While Parlato cheerfully admits that she wouldn't mind singing like Aretha Franklin, she's deeply satisfied with the singer she's become, an artist who intuits the emotional life of whatever songs she chooses. That self-acceptance is a philosophy she imparts to her own students, many of them still in college or high school.

"The more I teach the more I reflect on myself and see myself in them," says Parlato thoughtfully. "I tell them, 'Stop trying so hard. Stop thinking that you have to change the world. Accept yourself as a person, and relate your personal life to your music.' That's the only way we can be honest and tell our own story. Nurture yourself as if you were a little baby and choose a song that speaks to that feeling."



Simply Parlato

That tag-team deconstruction that Gretchen Parlato and Robert Glasper utilized in building *The Lost and Found* is most strikingly — and surprisingly — realized in the duo's spare re-examination of Simply Red's "Holding Back the Years." The 27-year-old song that kicks off the album isn't a track that anyone would call particularly edgy or cool, even when it hit the top of the *Billboard* Top 100 chart or was sampled by rap group Brand Nubian in 1994. Parlato and Glasper's wistful, sensual version dispels any vague MTV memories of Simply Red's ginger-haired frontman Mick Hucknall wailing and wandering along an English seacoast. Parlato's focus on veiled duality sustains a slow-burning tension — is the song a crushing lament or an uplifting mantra? — and transforms the familiar song into Parlato's own. Yet she admits that she was initially skeptical when Glasper suggested the track.

"He said, 'You need to do something that everyone knows, a song that, unless you're really young, you know and it speaks to everyone,'" Parlato recalls and then laughs. "He also joked that we needed to do a song that white people know! He's hilarious, but there's some truth in that."

Most importantly, Parlato discovered her crucial emotional entrance into the lyrics, excising a few of Hucknall's original lines and finding the door within the stanza, "Holding back the years/The fear I had so long/When somebody hears/Listen to the fear that's gone."

Glasper cites "Holding Back the Years" as a revelatory example of Parlato's vocal prowess, not only a perfect match of song with singer, but recorded in just one take. "We both love '80's music, and I wanted to find a song that everyone loved no matter what color you are or where you grew up," he says. "The Simply Red song is just that. I wanted to change it, but just enough so it wasn't overkill and the vibe of the song was dead." —KM

Her second cup of tea gone cold, Parlato rises from the table to leave and it's noted that her stylish, high-heeled black suede boots might be ruined by the deep, dark puddles of slush transforming every Manhattan curbside into a treacherous Loch Ness.

"Oh, I'll be okay," she muses, glancing benevolently at her soon-to-be-drowned boots. "I don't have to walk that far to get where I need to be." ▲